The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the Gay men's community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of Gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

---

**Generating Compassion: The Practice of Tonglen**

Michael P. McManus, a former bodyguard/interpreter for General Colin Powell, has been a practicing Buddhist for 16 years. A former monk with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, McManus is currently at Stanford University pursuing a Ph.D. in Buddhist Psychology. He spoke to GBF on April 4, 2000.

Good morning – almost afternoon here. I want to thank each of you for coming up. This is my first chance to get to speak to everybody here, and it's good to see so many people.

A bit of background on myself. I started studying Buddhism back in 1984 when I was in high school. I was taking some honors courses my senior year at high school at a university near where I was living. Afterwards I would speak with the philosophy and psychology students just about life, and they said, "Oh, you have a very Buddhist outlook on life. Are you Buddhist?" I said, "Actually, I'm Catholic." The only view of Buddhism I had at that time was the little fat statue and burning incense. Other than that, I had no clue. They said, "Your outlook on life is very Buddhist; you should read some books about it." So I did my own investigation and said, "Well, this Buddha guy had it on. This is the way I think; this is quite interesting." Then after graduation from high school, I went into the military and was stationed in Germany, where I had the opportunity, living about half an hour from the French border, to go into Dordogne, France, where two Tibetan lamas were teaching. At the time, I just thought they were two really cool lamas. One was Dudre Rinpoche; the other was Dicho Tense Rinpoche. (Laughter). Later I found that they're probably two of the greatest lamas of our century. To me, they were just really cool teachers that I got to learn a lot from. And so I had my practices which they gave me to do, and I just followed that through.

In 1996, I was teaching in Thailand, and after my year contract was up, I just had a feeling that I should go to India to see the Dalai Lama and see if I could get some meditation instruction or something. When I was there, the next thing I knew, I had made the choice to become a monk. And people say, "Oh, that's such a big life-changing choice! Did you really have to think about?" I said, "No. It was like waking up and putting on a pair of underwear. It was that routine of a choice that I made." To make a long story short, the next thing I realized, I was in front of the Dalai Lama being ordained as a monk, and stayed that way for just...
GBF Committees
We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity!

Steering Committee
Jack Busby
Justin Hecht
David Holmes
Michael Langdon
Lee Robbins
Clint Seiter
Jim Stewart
Peter Washburn

Newsletter
Michael Langdon, Editor
Greg King, Art Director
Howard King, Editorial Consultant
Jim Stewart, Transcriber
Snake Woolington, Mailing Party
Robin Levitt, Mailing List

Newsletter Mailing Party
Snake Woolington,
Contact
415.552.6378

Hamilton House
Clint Seiter, Contact
415.386.3088

Website
Joe Kukukka
Contact
webmaster@gaybuddhist.org

Sunday Sitting Facilitators
Justin Hecht, Contact
415.673.0283

under four years. I just recently disrobed, in November, for a couple of different reasons: to pursue my Ph.D. at Stanford in Buddhist Psychology, and to pursue a relationship. Being a monk is not really conducive for that. There are other stories about that.

The thing I’d like to talk about today is the practice of Tonglen. Tonglen is the Tibetan word for giving and receiving. I’m going to backtrack a little bit. I’m not sure what tradition everyone here is coming from. I guess it’s all the same Buddha.

GBF: All different traditions.

MM: Good. The tradition I’m in is the Tibetan tradition of Vajrayana which has its basis, its foundation on I don’t want to use the term Hinayana because that’s such a pejorative, but if I say Theravada, that limits, because there are 22 schools in the Hinayana, so I don’t know if there’s a better word that you would want to use for that, but Vajrayana has a basis in the Hinayana and the Mahayana teachings. Without that foundation, you don’t have what makes up the Vajrayana. It includes all traditions, all schools of thought leading up to what’s being taught in the Tibetan tradition.

The practice of Tonglen, of giving and receiving, is actually probably one of the most profound practices that you can do for yourself and for others. I’ll get into the specifics of how to do the practice, but the first thing that you need to generate for this practice is the compassion within yourself for yourself. This is, I guess, coming into the dualistic way of thinking, separating yourself from another person, when in actuality, if you kind of go with the premise of equanimity, thinking that you are equal to the person sitting next to you, whether it be the Dalai Lama, the King of Thailand, or the guy who sweeps, you are no different from them, and they’re not different from you: we’re all on the same level.

With that idea, that thought, generating that compassion in your thought, seeing that “Okay, we’re all in the same boat, we all suffer, we all want happiness, we all want to help others have happiness and not to cause others suffering,” to have that conscious thought in your mind and in your heart – that’s the seed that needs to be planted, that will start to grow, once you think it more and more. It’s easy to have compassion for those that we love – our family members, our loved ones, and then our friends – and spreading out compassion that way is a good way to start, to generate from a loved one. You can use your mother, for example, or a grandparent, somebody that you had a real close connection to that you love. Starting with that one person, just generate that loving kindness, that compassion, that understanding, that care. That’s the important thing that opens up your heart, to be able to do it for others, and then branch out from there. Branch out to your friends, people that you want to have an acquaintance with, that you don’t know as well. That’s maybe a little tough, but once you make the connection, you can see how interdependent everyone is. Then branch it out from there, branch it out to people you don’t know, strangers you see walking down the street, someone you maybe have an indifference to, neither your friend nor someone you dislike. Then take even a step further, branching that compassion out to people you perceive as your enemy, people that you don’t particularly get along with, people you don’t like – that’s the challenge. Some people just like to bite that one right off at the beginning and go into that, which is good, a true test of how much compassion you can open in your heart and your mind for people.

The funny thing is with people who you perceive as your enemy – I use the word perceive because in reality they’re not your enemy, just as someone who’s your friend or loved one – it’s just all based on perception, and a choice of
perception: "I'm choosing to look at this person in this context, in this light." And just as you choose to see them as an enemy, you can choose to see them as a friend, someone who is suffering and in the same place that you are. And with that you can change your view, change your perception, and allow those people you have difficulty with or that are troubling you to come into this circle that you are generating with this compassion, this love, and then you take it from there.

With that, I would say on the scale of difficulty of one to ten, dealing with someone you see as an enemy, someone that you have total angst for, is probably the most difficult. I think dealing with that, trying to look at that in another way, with cyclic existence and rebirth and reincarnation, you'll see that maybe this person who is your sworn enemy in this lifetime could have been, in a past lifetime, a parent or a sister or brother, someone you cared for, someone you loved. It's just funny how this time around, they're put into a different light, but karma is a funny thing that way. You can't escape cause and effect, unfortunately. So, using that karma, let that karma exhaust. By the phrase "let that karma exhaust," I don't mean passively sit by and let things just take their natural course. It's part of being Buddhist. I'll use a term from the Judaic-Christian background because many people here are probably from that originally, that whole turning the other cheek. My personal thought on this is that turning the other cheek does not mean being a doormat, does not mean sitting there being passive; take a proactive stance and change your perceptions, change your view on this person who is troubling you, this person who is an enemy. I think that you'll find that once you generate that compassion for yourself and them, that ice cube will start to melt, and warm, fuzzy things will start to pop up.

Now, this practice of Tonglen can be done from one person to another person, and then expanded out from there. And the actual meditation, the actual practice, when you're doing it, can be done in many different ways. When they think of meditation, most Westerners, think of sitting in lotus or half-lotus position with their back straight. That's one way of meditation. Actually, meditation is bringing yourself to the present, bringing yourself to the here and now. We spend so much of our day thinking about the past: "Oh, what I should have done! What I should have done!" Should have didn't happen. Or we think about the future: "What I should be doing, what I should be doing." Meditation brings you into the here and now; it brings you into the present. Just as waves come out of an ocean — you know, waves are generated in the ocean — they run through their course, and then they dissolve back into the ocean. Likewise with our thoughts. Our thoughts start in the mind; they take their little trip, and then they dissolve back into mind. Now, between each thought, there's a small space, a small gap. That gap, that space, is meditation. Expand on that gap, making it a little bit longer. Even if it's just a millisecond or a couple of seconds, that's fine; expand on that gap.

Now within that gap, that meditation, the Tonglen practice can come into play. I don't know what type of meditation you do, but let the thoughts come in. Don't try to block them out — let them flow freely; embrace them, even if they're the most crazy, out of the world thoughts. I was meditating the other day, just meditating on something calm and peaceful, when these visions of Michael the baby killer came into play. I was impaling these babies on stakes, and I was like, "Where do these thoughts come from? This is just insane." So I thought, "Okay, I won't attach or have aversion to these thoughts. I'll just let them come in and let them play out and worry about where they come from later." And so then after those thoughts came pleasant thoughts. It's just a mixture of good and bad. So between those thoughts is that gap, that space. Expand on that.

It's within that space, that gap, that true meditation takes place and the practice of Tonglen can be most effective.

What you're doing with this practice now is focusing on one person in particular that you are close to, that you know has a lot of suffering. And while you're doing this you could be sitting down, you could be in the car driving, you could be in the shower, you could be eating, just as long as you are keeping your mind in the present, in the here and now, what you're doing, the physical practice. Tibetans love to visualize. They do a lot of visualization-type of practices, and what you want is to have this person in your mind as if they are right in front of you, and you see all their suffering, and you're taking that on. On your in-breath, you imagine that all their suffering, all their disease, their sickness, their pain, bundles up in black smoke or black light — black smoke may be easier to visualize — and on your in-breath you take that black smoke into you, and in your mind you say, "I want to take on this person's suffering, their pain, all of that, take it into me." Then on your out-breath, breathe out white smoke, white light that's coming from your heart and your breath, your nose or your mouth, whichever way you're exhaling, and when you're breathing out this white light, this white smoke, give it back to that person, with the thought that, "Let this white light, this white smoke, heal them, relieve their suffering, even if it's just in the smallest bit, as much as I can help, as much as I can do, give that back." Continue this giving and taking back and forth, and you'll see why it's such a profound practice.

This is a story that was related to me by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. One of the greatest practitioners of Tonglen was a man by the name of Geshe Takawa, who lived a few hundred years ago. He studied this practice of Tonglen and ended up curing a lot of people with leprosy just by doing the practice. Geshe Takawa had a brother who was
very skeptical of anything spiritual, anything religious, and didn’t believe in anything of what he called Tibetan hokey-pokey. But after he saw the actual physical changes and the healing and curing of these people, he became interested, and so asked his brother to teach him to do the practice. So Geshe Takawa said, “Well, if I can change my brother’s point of view and perception on this, then anybody can do this practice.” That’s the thing: anybody can do this practice. It’s a very profound, very healing practice, and the results – I mean, you’re putting in motion the wheels of cause and effect. You can start off with the one person, and then expand it from there, to maybe a group of people. Focus your energies on a group of people and then expand it from there. Just grow it bigger and bigger until you’re doing it for all beings in the universe. Now it’s hard to envision all beings in the universe, each one individually, so I like to keep it simple at first, keep it on a one-to-one, on people that you know. You can do the practice on one person for a half-hour and then move on to another person you know who’s having suffering and pain, or include them all in a group. As long as you can picture them in your mind, it’s a good focus for the meditation to keep you in line with that person and make that connection with them.

It’s such a profound practice. Often for the person doing it, the question arises, “If I’m taking on this person’s suffering and sickness, won’t I get sick? Won’t I feel worn out or worn down?” And actually the answer is “No” because when you’re taking that black smoke in, you’re purifying it. And you’re purifying it not only for that person, but also for your own negative karma, your own suffering, your own sickness. When you’re visualizing that and purifying that and putting that back out as white light and white smoke, you’re giving that purification back to that person. It’s not like you’re taking on their bad karma. That you can’t do. I don’t think anybody is able to take on someone else’s karma, unfortunately. But when you’re talking about collective karma, as a group, this is where that comes into play, where at least you can take on the suffering, the sickness, the unhappiness of that person, and give it back to them purified. That will set the wheel for them to have better karma, better karma for them to ripen, and dissolve and do away with the negative karma that they had started, that they had put into motion.

This practice can be done, like I say, sitting, walking, eating, in the shower. I’d like to open it up to questions, because there are usually a lot of questions that come up with this that I didn’t address.

GBF: I was taught that when you’re doing the practice, and you’re taking in the smoke, you’re dissolving your ego, and when you breathe out, you’re radiating out health, purity. Sometimes I get the feeling that it’s not working or something, that there must be something I’m doing wrong, or they just have a lot of negative karma.

MM: You’re breathing in and out, right? Then it’s working. Those thoughts that arise – “Am I helping this person? Is this effective?” Yes, it is. It all starts with your intention and your motivation. Out of pure intention and pure motivation to help this person, to help relieve them, just the intention right there is enough to help that person, even before you do the practice. This practice is the best way to chop at that construction of our suffering, our ego. It’s a good way to cut out the self-cherishing, the self-grasping. Our ego is the root of all our suffering, actually, and though it keeps growing back, this practice really helps to whittle it down. You’re breathing in and out; you’re helping them.

GBF: My perception around issues of purification, at least in my processes, is that it takes me right back to ego, because, for me, when I ponder in that
area, I get this "Okay it's the ego doing the purification, or there's something special about me that I can purify something for another person, or the other person is better than me," all this kind of stuff. I'm wondering if you sense that there's change in the fundamental understanding of Tonglen on the basis of removing the illusion, as opposed to purifying the situation. At least for me, I find if I work in the direction of removing illusion or disbanding outmoded, worn-out misperceptions, then I don't get quite so hung up.

MM: That's a tough one, because our ego creeps into every situation, even when we're studying the dharma. It goes back to looking at your intention, your motivation. Are you motivated out of true compassion to help this person, to help relieve their suffering? I try to keep it real simple, and if that works, looking at your motivation, your intention — I mean, would that help?

GBF: For me, it doesn't change the situation there. It's hard for me to know whether this is just me or whether it's a broader issue, but it seems that it still leaves the ego on its throne. I do agree with your point that ego never ever fades away; rather, your understanding and perception of ego can change over time, and one can perhaps put it in a whole new light. But for me, moving away from the ego as the active part of the thing that does something, moving more towards something that's letting all the illusions fall away.

MM: I see what you're getting at. It's difficult to speak, not coming from a position of having my ego totally destroyed. I'm definitely nowhere near that. Ultimately, in an ultimate world, there is no ego — ego does not exist, but unfortunately we don't live in an ultimate world; we live in a relative world, and because of that, because of our karmic vision, ego is there, and that is something that I guess you just have to look at, but don't get attached or averted to it. Let your ego sit on the throne, but keep it over there. Focus on your intention, your motivation to help other people, just to be of use, just to generate that compassion, and if it's your ego doing it, then ... I don't know. Look at the end result. Are you helping people? Are you being of benefit? That's the only thing I can say. That's a tough one. That requires some thought.

GBF: Or lack of it.

MM: Maybe that's it: just don't think of it!

GBF: This is difficult because it involves basically putting someone else first, and the ego doesn't much like that, so it would be natural for the ego to say, "Oh, this is a stupid practice!" or "I'm just inflating myself!" or "I'm such a good person."

MM: Those thoughts will arise, and it's your ego speaking. The thing with ego is that you've got to let it take its course, but if you try to harness it, that's when you'll experience the problems. It's more than trying to control it. It's like trying to catch a butterfly: the more you chase after that butterfly, try to catch it, the more it will fly away from you. But if you just sit there and just be, and rest, it will probably come and land on your shoulder. Then when it's on your shoulder, then deal with it.

GBF: If you're open to other questions, I'd love to know what you thought about working with Colin Powell.

GBF: He's a good man. He has a good family. Actually, he knew I was gay when I was working for him at the time. This was when he was a three star general in Germany, and I was one of his interpreters and one of his bodyguards, and the gay issue was really not an issue. He has a lesbian daughter. It was all about your conduct and how you were doing your job. But then in

GBF Homeless Project
If you are able to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the second Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Secret at 415.396.5088. GBF volunteers prepare a dinner funded by GBF for homeless families.

Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF
GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha and the community. So far this year we have received over $800 through members' generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information: 415.881.4910.

GBF needs you to contribute your services to the Sangha as a Host for Sunday morning meditations. Sign up to help provide a hospitable setting for our members to come together. Call Juanita Hecht for information: 415.673.0283.

GBF Website
www.gaybuddhist.org
'93 when I came out publicly in the March on Washington, of course he had to give the party line, which I understood. It's interesting: at the time I was working for him, he was registered as an Independent, but now the Republicans snatched him up, so - He's a good man, an honorable man. It's just that - I guess all politicians eventually bow down to the party line on things, which is unfortunate.

GBF: I'm interested in your experiences in the military, whether you were identifying yourself as a Buddhist at that time.

MM: Actually, I was. And luckily, I never had to put my Buddhist morals, my Buddhist principles, to the test with my job, with what I did. There were times when I had to use force. I like to use the term wrath. Wrath is sometimes misunderstood. There is no anger in wrath. Wrath is - I call it tough love. Some people respond to the sweet, peaceful, sugary kind of love, and with some people, that doesn't work. You have to respond to them with wrath. It's like the Mom who sees her kid out in the street about to get hit by a car. She's not going to say, "Oh, child, please come back here." She's going to go out there and snatch him by the back of his neck and drag him and probably give him a swat and instill the idea that "you shouldn't be doing this!" And so luckily, being in the military, I never had to violate any of my Buddhist thoughts or beliefs. If during the time of war, like when the Gulf War came up - luckily because I worked for General Powell, he made it so I didn't get called into action, which is a good thing, because I would have claimed conscientious objector status and not partaken in that, which is interesting. Because I was in the military, I share that collective karma of that group, which is not probably the best karma going around, but I tried to just do my part to make a difference. There were times when being a bodyguard required that I be forceful with people that maybe came a little too close to the general. In Germany - the situation there during the late '80's - there was a lot of terrorist activity going on, so all general officers and their families had bodyguards. Their house, just like the president's, was guarded. They had a big motorcade anytime they went anywhere. There were times that some people got a little too close, then ....

GBF: Could you lead us in a Tonglen meditation.

MM: That would be great. So just find a comfortable position, wherever that is. So, concentrating on one particular person that you have in mind who has a lot of suffering, a lot of pain, picture that person in your mind and in your heart right now. Get a good visualization of that person. See them sitting right in front of you, being no different than you. On your in-breath, breathe in all that black smoke, all their suffering, their hurt, their disease, their pain, their hunger: bring it into you. On your out-breath, breathe out the white healing light, the white smoke, the positive energy. Breathe it right back into them, seeing that this white energy totally fills their body from head to toe, healing what's ailing them, diminishing their pain, diminishing their suffering ....

Now, expand your visualization out towards those who you maybe have an indifference towards, maybe the person you passed on the street that you saw suffering ....

Now bring someone into your thoughts, a person you perceive as your enemy, a person who you have trouble with. See that in this lifetime, yes, they may be what you see as your enemy, but in a previous lifetime, they were someone who loved you, who has cared for you. Make that connection to them. Take on their suffering, their anger; take on their pain that caused this perception of them being an enemy; take that into you, purify it, and breathe it back out to them. See this person as yourself, someone who's suffering, someone who wants happiness, and see that you can effect change, a change in your perception and a change in them, when you're breathing out the white smoke, the white light to them. Really connect with this person....

Okay, now with a view in your head of these three different types of people - your loved ones, an indifferent person, and this person you see as your enemy - see them now as all the same, having no distinction between enemy, loved one, and indifferent ....

And then in one last inhale, imagine you're taking all the suffering of the whole universe into you - it's okay; you can handle it - and then on the exhale, breathe out that white light, that white smoke to whole universe, giving it back to every sentient being.

Okay.

GBF: Thank you very, very much.
GBF Calendar
San Francisco/Bay Area Events

The March GBF speakers are as follows:

March 4: Jim Wilson
March 11: Scott Hunt
March 18: Open discussion
March 25: Carol Newhouse

Carol is in the lineage of the meditation master U Ba Khin and his Dharma heir Ruth Denison. She is Guiding Teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley and the Women's Dharma Group in Sebastopol. She has studied and practiced Vipassana Meditation since 1977.

Topic: RIGHT SPEECH - Wise and loving communication. Learning to speak wisely is essential to the path of liberation. Right Speech helps us to live more fully and consciously in relationship to all beings. But when are our words truly helpful? What is the role of silence? And what is the difference between "just being nice" and communication that heals?

East Bay Sitting.
1st & 3rd Thursday of each month, 7:30-9:00. Half-hour sitting followed by tea and discussion. For more information, call 510-649-1697.

Next Steering Committee Meeting.
March 8, 2001, 7:30 p.m., at the home of Lee Robbins, 4433 17th Street, San Francisco. For more information, call 415-552-9800.

Photo: Richard Roth

WINTER RETREAT
MARCH 16-18, 2001
VAJRAPANI

Our GBF Retreat this winter will be a time for all of us to meet together in sangha, meditate, and join in dharma talks with Jim Wilson and Lama Thubten. Jack Busby and Jim Wilson will offer the Refuge Vows, and Lee Robbins will lead a mindfulness meditation.

Please send your fee of $145.00 (no one turned away for lack of funds) to:
Retreat GBF
2215-R Market Street, PMB456
San Francisco, CA 94114

Please include special dietary needs and if you need or can give a ride. An information packet will be sent out March 5, 2001.
For Information call or email
Howard King: (510) 649-1697
HKing99999@aol.com

Photo: Richard Roth
By the power and truth of this practice,
may all beings have happiness
and the causes of happiness,
may all be free from sorrow
and the causes of sorrow,
may all never be separated from the sacred happiness
which is without sorrow,
and may all live in equanimity,
without too much attachment
or too much aversion,
and live believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF Dedication of Merit

How to Reach Us
GBF Sangha
Send correspondence and address changes to: GBF, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, San Francisco, California 94114. Send e-mail to <gbfsf@hotmail.com>. For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message: 415.974.9878.

GBF Newsletter
Send submissions to: Editor,
GBF Newsletter, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, San Francisco, CA 94114. If possible, include a Mac disk in Word or as a text file along with your hard copy. We do reserve the right to edit for clarity or brevity.